DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 571 EC 220 775

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TITLE The World of Work: Is There a Match between Vocational Preparation and Employer Expectations?
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 10p.; In: Baine, David, Ed.; And Others. Alternative Futures for the Education of Students with Severe Disabilities (Edmonton, Canada, May 6-8, 1987). For proceedings, see EC 220 763; for other selected papers, see ED 220 764-782.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; *Education Work Relationship; *Employer Attitudes; Employer Employee Relationship; Employment Potential; Expectation; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Competence; *Job Placement; Secondary Education; *Vocational Education; Vocational Rehabilitation

ABSTRACT

The first part of the paper describes research addressing whether there is a match between vocational preparation and employer expectations for individuals having disabilities, with emphasis on research performed in Alberta, Canada. Research goals include the identification of generic and/or specific skills and behaviors for vocational training of individuals with disabilities. The second part of the paper addresses discrepancies between vocational training and actual job success and proposes additional and alternative strategies for ensuring greater success of workers with disabilities in the competitive workplace. (Author/DB)

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The World of Work: Is There a Match Between Vocational Preparation and Employer Expectations?[1]

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Abstract

In the first part of the paper, research is described examining the extent to which there is a match between vocational preparation and employer expectations. The goal of the research is to identify generic and/or specific skills and behaviors for vocational training of individuals with disabilities. The second part of the paper addresses discrepancies between vocational training and actual job success and proposes additional and alternative strategies for ensuring greater success of workers with disabilities in the competitive workplace.

The first part of the paper addresses the issue of whether there is a match between vocational preparation and employer expectations for individuals with disabilities. The paper focuses particularly on research in Alberta. An implicit goal in research on the topic of vocational preparation and employer expectation is the notion that generic and/or specific skills and behaviors can be identified and then trained to produce workers who, although having disabilities, can be successful in competitive employment. The second part of the paper explores discrepancies between vocational training and occupational success. Alternative strategies essential to ensure successful employment are also reviewed.

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Community integration through remunerative employment is widely targeted as the ultimate criterion of success in the vocational rehabilitation process. For many clients, however, this goal remains illusive because of individual factors such as lack of relevant skills and abilities, and environmental circumstances such as lack of job support networks.

A variety of community-relevant vocational and social survival skills have been identified as necessary for individuals to enter and remain in competitive employment (Rusch & Schutz,1979; Sowers, Thompson, & Connis, 1979; Wehman & Hill, 1980). Several authors have emphasized the importance of vocational skills such as speed (Moss, 1979) and productivity (DeFazio & Flexer, 1983). Krauss and MacEchron (1982) concluded that job placement of individuals with disabilities was related to (a) measures of job behavior and abilities, (b) workers' ability to meet the requirements of the job, and (c) employment reinforcements. In contrast, several studies have suggested that social skills are better predictors of occupational success than vocational skills (Carsrud, Carsrud, Dodd, Thompson, & Gray, 1981; Foss & Peterson, 1981; Gibson, 1967; Gruenhagen, 1982; Stewart, 1977; Wehman, Hill, Goodall, Cleveland, Brooke, & Pentecast, 1982). These authors stress the importance of personality, attitude, and motivation as factors for vocational success.

Support networks have also been identified as important predictors of vocational success. In a follow-up of sheltered workshop clients placed in competitive jobs, Brickey, Campbell, and Browning (1985) found that participants who were still employed after four to five years had parents who wanted them to work competitively. These parents had considerable influence over the clients.

Other outside factors which may significantly influence initial employment opportunities and employment tenure are employer attitudes toward persons with disabilities. In a survey of Alberta resource, manufacturing, and service employers (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986), it was found that while approximately two-thirds of the employers initially expressed a general willingness to hire individuals with disabilities, when asked if they would currently be willing to receive inquiries from such individuals, the receptivity dropped to 39% of those initially willing. These statistics were calculated before the current high rate of unemployment. The situation for handicapped persons is probably worse now.

Another Alberta study, conducted by Evans, Dion, Morrissey, and Paul (1985), examined employer attitudes, behavioral expectations, and hiring practices as they related to employment of individuals with disabilities. Employers were asked to rate their likelihood of hiring employees with three types of disabilities. The results indicated that the

likelihood of hiring employees with physical disabilities was considerably higher than for individuals with learning disabilities followed by those with emotional difficulties. Most positive attitudes were toward employees with no disabilities.

Expectations of a typical employer for job readiness were compared with those of vocational rehabilitation staff. Analysis indicated that rehabilitation staff and employers agreed on most employee attributes. However, on six attributes there were significant differences, including number of unexcused absences, reporting late for work, leaving work unexcused, returning late from breaks, disturbing peers, and inappropriate dress. Vocational rehabilitation staff showed *less* tolerance of these attributes than employers did. Evans et al. speculated that given employers' negative attitudes toward hiring individuals with disabilities, the vocational rehabilitation staff's stringent expectations for behavior on the job were likely beneficial in promoting placement of such individuals into employment.

In recent years, a number of studies have been published reporting the results of employer surveys focusing on the issue of employment survival skills (Alper, 1985; Gruenhagen, 1982; McConaughy, Stowitschek, Salzberg, & Peatross, 1985; Rusch, Schutz, & Agran, 1982; Salzberg, Agran, Lignugaris/Kraft, 1986). These studies have resulted in a long list of behaviors deemed important for success in entry-level competitive employment. However, comparison of one survey with another soon reveals a definite lack of unanimity that may reflect both differences in the jobs surveyed (Salzberg et al., 1986) as well as regional differences in employer expectations and priorities (Alper, 1985). A thorough understanding of employment survival must take into account the likelihood that different jobs may call for different skill profiles and that the priorities placed on certain behaviors by employers may vary from one community or region to another. To prepare clients with disabilities for entry into productive, competitive employment, determination of essential skills for prevocational curricula is critically important. (Alper, 1985).

Mueller and Wilgosh (1985) attempted to establish the most important social and vocational skills and behaviors for entry into competitive employment in Alberta. Provincial vocational training/rehabilitation and transitional training programs serving adults with mental disabilities were surveyed. Those skills consistently highly endorsed as most important for employment success included following directions, good attendance/punctuality, good grooming/hygiene, good social skills, being reliable/responsible/honest, good communication skills, attending to task, cooperative attitude, and accepting criticism. The most common reasons listed by agencies for failure in employment were poor interper-

sonal skills, lack of attendance/punctuality, lack of self-confidence, lack of understanding of the job, poor work attitudes, and lack of follow-up support.

A subsequent study was made of vocational skills training agencies (Mueller, Wilgosh, & Dennis, 1987). The respondents were asked to rate 135 skills statements, derived from the earlier Mueller/Wilgosh study and related literature, for relative importance to employment success. The majority of skills seen as extremely important for job survival related to dependability on the job, social and interpersonal behavior, job safety, attendance and punctuality, acceptance of instructions, criticism and supervision, personal grooming and appearance, and neat work habits.

To obtain the data necessary for the development of a valid employment training curriculum, researchers must survey local employers of occupations for which clients are to be trained. Thus Mueller (1987) attempted to determine which basic vocational and work-related social skills were rated by a broad cross-section of Alberta employers as most important for job survival in entry-level competitive employment. Mueller also sought to determine to what extent the perceived importance of basic job survival skills differed between eight occupations commonly open to persons with mild to moderate mental handicap. The skills statements rated by employers were selected from a larger pool of items drawn from previous research (Mueller & Wilgosh, 1985; Mueller, Wilgosh, & Dennis, 1987). The results revealed that employers wanted employees who were socially responsible and trustworthy, who worked safely, and who could be depended on to do as told with minimum supervision. Given such an employee, employers were less concerned about issues of production speed, employee adaptability, flexibility, and learning proficiency, or occasional negative responses to criticism. For these low skill, entry-level jobs, employers would also appear to place little value on basic prevocational academic skills or the ability to organize and manage others. As well, the most important skills were mainly generic across jobs. Different importance was noted predominantly with respect to safety issues and personal appearance and hygiene. This finding lends support to the concept of generic skills training in vocational rehabilitation programs for persons with mental handicaps.

To summarize, the recent Alberta research studies of the match between vocational preparation and employer expectations suggest that there is agreement between the skills and behaviors being trained in vocational preparation programs and employer's expectations of the skills and behaviors necessary for successful entry into competitive employment. Social and interpersonal skills are viewed as essential to job success as are specific and generic job skills training. Thus, it should

be possible to train "successful" clients for competitive employment by developing competence in a finite set of skills. However, employer attitudes seem to vary depending on the nature of an individual's disability. In general, employer attitudes are less positive toward employees with disabilities than they are toward employees with no disabilities.

Unfortunately, data is accumulating (Ebert & Dennis, 1986), which suggests that, even though vocational preparation programs are doing well in training appropriate job skills for clients with disabilities, there is no guarantee that such training will be sufficient for either job acquisition or job retention. To illustrate the job skills training dilemma,[2] a recent Alberta study by Gourlay (1985) used a combination of formal tests, background histories, and observed behaviors to make comparisons between groups of successfully employed graduates and individuals still actively participating in a vocational training program. Employed graduates performed significantly better than the in-training group on psychometric, adaptive, and vocational measures. From this data and employer input on most common strengths and weaknesses of target employees, a profile of the "successful client" could be generated as a training goal. The major deficiency in such a strategy, however, is that it assumes that there is an average profile for employment. However, simple job site analysis quickly reveals that no employment situation can be considered to be an "average" one. Each situation is unique, requiring its own particular combination of skills and habits. A second major deficiency in such a strategy emerges from practical experience which would suggest that a number of individuals will be able to meet the criteria (i.e., match the profile), yet remain within active training outside the competitive employment sector.

Additional research on employer attitudes (Gibson & Groeneweg, 1986) seems to suggest that employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities may in part be created within the existing private sector by capitalizing on receptive employer attitudes. However, because employer receptivity may not translate to willingness or capability to provide on-the-job training, and in recognition that training facilities removed from the real world of work will likely not be able to develop all the relevant work behaviors and skills—including the necessary individualized support network—alternative approaches are needed.

An effective employer-employee matching strategy will include as a substantive part the cultivation of positive attitudes about the work competence of individuals with disabilities within the employment sector. This cultivation of attitudes undertaken at both the large scale community level as well as at the individual employer level would be initiated well in advance of specific approaches for employment, so that

the positive attitudes produced can provide some leverage to gain access to the employment sector—even if only on an individual by individual basis. Indeed, substantial anecdotal information suggests that numerous employers who were initially dubious about the competence of individuals with mental handicaps, subsequent to trial placements or full employment experiences within their enterprises, demonstrated significant attitudinal shifts to the point of independently approaching rehabilitation specialists with requests for new employees. Clearly, the responsibility for inculcating positive attitudes among employers cannot rest solely with the placement counsellor but must be a shared responsibility among diverse sectors of the rehabilitation and employment community.

At a pragmatic level, it may be appropriate to suggest that the leverage for employment opportunities which must be gained, should arise in part through recognition by employers that there is a social responsibility which they must display in order to accrue longer term societal and personal gains. This social responsibility must be recognizable at the societal level rather than the individual ("client") level, which has historically been the basis on which the employers have been approached.

In summary, part of the strategy in matching potential employees and employers involves both aggregate and individual approaches. The aggregate approach involves community education which can lead the way to individualized training and placement along a continuum from full competitive employment to supported employment in enclave situations, depending on the capabilities and needs of the individual employee. This latter stage of individualization will be characterized by a combination of standardized rehabilitation techniques and artful facilitation.

Further directions in vocational training should involve the following changes: (a) Vocational agencies need to become far more sophisticated in their "marketing" strategy, moving away from the áhelp the handicapped" approach to embrace the notion that the vocational training agencies have a valuable product. The person who has graduated from their training programs is one who is reliable, hardworking, and a valuable employee whose disability is not a job handicap. (b) Vocational rehabilitation needs to improve its service to people with disabilities and to the community. Too often, job placement personnel fail to provide sufficient assistance to the employee to make the transition to the workplace. Vocational training agencies also need to encourage commitment from the community and from employers to support training and to hire adults with disabilities. (c) There is also a need to broaden the societal criteria for acceptability and to increase the tolerance for dif-

ference. All of these strategies can lead closer to the goal of successful employment of individuals with handicaps in the competitive workplace.

Notes

1. An earlier version of the content of this paper was presented as a symposium at the Severe & Multiple Handicaps: Alternative Futures Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, May 1987. Authorship is in sequential order of individual contributions to the paper. Author affiliations are L. Wilgosh, Professor, University of Alberta (Educational Psychology); G. Groeneweg, Acting Executive Director, Vocational and Rehabilitation Research Institute, Calgary; H. Mueller, doctoral student, University of Alberta (Educational Psychology); B. Evans, Program Coordinator—Assessment Services, Employment Preparation Centre, Calgary; S. Dennis, Vice-President Research, Western Industrial Research & Training Centre, Edmonton.

2. The following segment and parts of the introduction are abstracted from a larger paper (Groeneweg, Gourlay, Perkins, & Gibson, 1987). G. Groeneweg was spokesperson for the group whose total contribution to the symposium and this ensuing paper is gratefully acknowledged by the authors.

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